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## Muted Reception: U.S. Propaganda and the Construction of Mexican Popular Opinion during the Second World War\*

In 1943, a few days prior to the community fair held each January in the mountainous region of Galeana, both the Governor of Monterrey and the commander of the Seventh Military Zone announced a new film exhibition to be screened under the auspices of the Civilian Defense Committee, the Mexican military, and the Rural Normal School. The film showing was to be coordinated by crew members of the Sydney Ross Company, a subsidiary of pharmaceutical giant Sterling Products of the United States, in collaboration with Nelson Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) and local Mexican business and manufacturing groups. The three-day fair went on from Friday night to Sunday evening, drawing close to ten thousand residents, with some traveling over twenty kilometers to get to the annual event. While the crew prepared for the film exhibition, an announcer reported on the progress of the war in Europe and the South Pacific with a distinctly pro-Allies slant. At this same event, the Sydney Ross Company set up tables advertising and marketing company products and services. Mexicans attending the fair received company handbills, pamphlets, and posters, and had an opportunity to sample consumer goods offered by the company. Working feverishly behind the scenes were professional surveyors, hired by the OCIAA, who were busy gauging the audience's opinions and reactions to the different films.<sup>1</sup>

Galeana was located in a remote area in the mountains, approximately 150 miles south of Monterrey, buttressed by nearby industrial, manufacturing, and mining complexes. Despite the town's seclusion and relative anonymity, Galeana and other similarly isolated areas in Mexico were strategic locations for the production of important raw materials necessary for the U.S. war

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1. United States, National Archives of Washington, DC (hereafter cited as NARA), Record Group (Hereafter cited as RG) 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Henry S. Waterman to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, February 11, 1943.

effort. These outlying areas in the interior of Mexico posed a complex challenge to U.S. propaganda agents of the OCIAA. Events taking place in Europe and the South Pacific were far removed from the minds of most of this segment of the Mexican population. As one American official lamented in 1943, "The attitude of the Mexican people toward the war continues to be apathetic."<sup>2</sup> The use of traditional mediums for the transmission of American propaganda, moreover, proved to be incompatible with social realities extant in the Mexican countryside, where a majority of the villagers were illiterate, a minority owned radios, and most lived miles away from the nearest movie house. Executives of the Sydney Ross Company offered the use of company sound trucks as a way of reaching out to this hard-to-reach constituency. Following a committee meeting, OCIAA officials decided to collaborate with multinational corporations owning such media vehicles, agreeing that their use offered an important opportunity to impress the message of cooperation and unity to the popular masses of the Mexican countryside.

The campaign to discern, reach, and influence mass public opinion in Mexico reflected a new strain in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America, representing the first time that policy makers attempted to shape inter-American relations by influencing popular opinion directly. Previously, the U.S. foreign policy establishment largely ignored the masses, judging their opinion to be unimportant to considerations of high politics and diplomacy. The assumption was that when it came to securing support for U.S. policies in the hemisphere, it was elite opinion—the attitudes and views of politicians, government officials, financiers, and so forth—that ultimately mattered.<sup>3</sup> However, competition with German propaganda in Latin America during the Second World War convinced officials of the need to legitimate their actions, in respect to the war, to heretofore ignored groups—peasants, laborers, and housewives. Concerns with subversive German activities and its impact on mass public opinion initially focused on Mexico. In fact, the OCIAA, which was formally established by a presidential executive order in 1941, was created in direct response to the fascist challenge in Mexico, though the scope of its activities was eventually widened to encompass all of Latin America.

In this organized effort to counter fascist propaganda, and tilt Mexican public opinion in favor of the United States, the OCIAA, led by Nelson Rockefeller, mobilized the resources and expertise of Hollywood, multinational corporations, and the American social sciences. Despite lingering tensions over Mexico's nationalization of American oil companies in 1938, this effort also received the formal

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2. NARA 812.00/32148, April 26, 1943.

3. On the role of elite economic and cultural exchanges in U.S.-Latin American relations, see Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1992); Julio Moreno, *Yankee Don't Go Home! Mexican Nationalism, American Business Culture, and the Shaping of Modern Mexico, 1920-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007).

backing of Mexican officials, for it dovetailed with the postrevolutionary state's developmental agenda and its efforts to consolidate one-party rule in Mexico.<sup>4</sup> With their combined assistance, the OCIAA worked to shape news and editorial coverage in Mexico, transmit U.S. radio programming to Mexican households, produced propaganda films in collaboration with Hollywood for distribution to Mexican movie houses, and organized film screenings throughout the countryside. The campaign to persuade and make Mexican mass opinion legible to U.S. policy makers involved interventions into the Mexican press as well as its radio and film industries. The propaganda apparatus and techniques developed in Mexico were eventually extended to the rest of Latin America. In 1942, the OCIAA established the Coordination Committee for Mexico to work closely with U.S. embassies throughout the hemisphere to implement propaganda programs styled after the model in Mexico.

The OCIAA's wartime program was part of a modified U.S. foreign policy strategy in Latin America. Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States formally renounced the use of military force, which had been the hallmark of U.S. foreign policy toward Central America and the Caribbean, and instead emphasized cooperation and trade in its inter-American relations, with the promise to be a "good neighbor."<sup>5</sup> This new noninterventionist policy in Latin America, which sought to achieve U.S. hemispheric dominance through other means, called for new foreign policy techniques that relied more on persuasion than overt coercion and this is where the operations of the OCIAA figured prominently.<sup>6</sup> Scholars have written about the pressure exerted by U.S. mass media, propaganda, and cultural diplomacy during the war and during the era of the Good Neighbor policy.<sup>7</sup> They describe how Latin America—and Mexico, in

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4. On U.S.-Mexico relations during the Second World War, see Blanca Torres, *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana, Periodo 1940-52* (Mexico City, 1979); Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lazaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940* (Albuquerque, NM, 1999); Stephen Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954* (Wilmington, NC, 1995).

5. Between 1900 and 1930, the United States engaged in over thirty formal military interventions in Latin America, dispatching troops six different times to Mexico alone. On Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, see Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York, 1961); and Irwin F. Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy: US Policies in Latin America, 1933-1945* (Baltimore, MD, 1980).

6. Scholars have questioned how much of a departure FDR's Good Neighbor policy represented from past policy, with some reinterpreting it as a modified strategy for maintaining American hegemony in the hemisphere. See Gerald K. Haines, "Under the Eagle's Wing: The Franklin Roosevelt Administration Forges an American Hemisphere," *Diplomatic History* 1 (Fall 1977): 373-88. On how interventions in Latin American domestic affairs continued as part of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, see Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (Cambridge, 2003).

7. See Stephen R. Niblo, "British Propaganda in Mexico during the Second World War: The Development of Cultural Imperialism," *Latin American Perspectives* 10, no. 4 (1983): 114-26; and his *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE, 1999); Fred Fejes, *Imperialism, Media, and the Good Neighbor: New Deal Foreign Policy and United States Shortwave Broadcasting to Latin America* (Norwood, MA, 1986).

particular—served as a laboratory for U.S. “cultural diplomacy,” incubating propaganda techniques and innovations that would later be used during the Cold War. However, these studies tell us very little about how they developed on the ground, and their day-to-day operation, nor do they consider how targeted audiences received the propaganda in Mexico or anywhere else in Latin America; instead, the power of foreign propaganda to sway and manipulate is assumed and the OCIAA’s wartime program is seen as a seamless bridge to postwar U.S. cultural imperialism.<sup>8</sup>

This article seeks to fill these lacunas within the existing literature by systematically reconstructing the OCIAA’s propaganda efforts in Mexico, and examining its impact on Mexican popular public opinion during the Second World War. In doing so, it aims to complicate the assumed monolithic effects of U.S. wartime propaganda in Mexico. Too often scholars have taken the power and effects of foreign propaganda in Latin America for granted.<sup>9</sup> While my sources, comprised mostly of the voices of U.S. government agents, will preclude any definitive conclusions on the matter of reception, examples of Mexicans contesting, negotiating, and on some occasions, forcefully rejecting its content and message will show that the influence of U.S. propaganda was neither irresistible nor straightforward. As we shall see, neither the full support of the Mexican state nor the expertise of Hollywood, multinational corporations, and the U.S. social sciences could ensure its faithful projection, transmission, and reception in wartime Mexico.

#### TURN TOWARD THE POPULAR

President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration organized efforts to promote America’s “Good Neighbor” policy during his presidency. In 1936, the United States and the nations of Latin America gathered for the Buenos Aires Convention. The Convention’s primary achievement was an agreed upon commitment to improve cultural relations between the countries of the Western Hemisphere. Following the gathering, the U.S. government established the Cultural Relations Division (CRD) under the auspices of the State Department. This new government agency, comprised primarily of university-based social scientists,

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8. On postwar U.S. cultural imperialism in Latin America, see Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York, 1975); Gerald K. Haines, *The Americanization of Brazil: A Study of U.S. Cold War Diplomacy in the Third World, 1945–54* (Wilmington, DE, 1989).

9. As empirical and historical case studies have shown, while cultural transmission of this kind was consistently asymmetrical, it was never unidirectional or singular in its influence. See John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore, MD, 1991); Seth Fein, “Everyday Forms of Transnational Collaboration: U.S. Film Propaganda in Cold War Mexico,” in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham, NC, 1998), 400–50; and his “Myths of Cultural Imperialism and Nationalism in Golden Age Mexican Cinema,” *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico, 1940–2000*, eds. Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov (Durham, NC, 2001), 159–98.

devised an intercultural program that included foreign fellowships, faculty and student exchanges, travel subsidies, libraries, books, music, art, educational films, cultural institutes, and international conferences.<sup>10</sup> Specific manifestations of CRD's efforts in Mexico included the construction of the Abraham Lincoln Library in Mexico City and the establishment of the Albert Markwardt English teaching center.

Despite reports of its salutary effects, Roosevelt's administration, as well as members of Congress, questioned the decidedly long-term strategy of CRD's programming. Anxious U.S. officials wanted immediate benefits pertaining to U.S. war aims. Charles Thomson, head of the CRD, responded to these concerns by arguing that the CRD programs were the only meaningful way to promote true and lasting relationship with the people of Latin America. He emphasized the importance of distinguishing the "cultural" program apart from propaganda, contending that the appearance of U.S. heavy-handedness would only enflame anti-American sentiment among the people of the region. Finally, falling back on an axiom of international affairs, Thomson argued that the key to gaining the support of the Latin American nations rested on gaining the support of elite members of society: Politicians, military leaders, lawyers, doctors, and other educated professionals. According to Thomson, the importance of the elite or educated class lay in their connection to state policy making and public opinion. These people, he argued, "are in a position to interpret the United States to the masses of the people."<sup>11</sup>

This conventional wisdom of "high" politics was challenged by an increasingly self-confident group of liberal internationalists within the administration, including President Franklin Roosevelt himself, who imputed the "masses" with historical agency, identifying them as actors in world affairs. Vice President Henry Wallace, speaking on behalf of the President, acknowledged that the cultural diplomacy (including overt propaganda) "must concentrate on the 10 percent who influenced and directed progress and public opinion in Latin America, [but] the other 90 percent also must be reached."<sup>12</sup> According to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the new emphasis on the popular classes was "designed to control the governments from within by building public opinion in this hemisphere on the friendship and understanding of the common people."<sup>13</sup> In light of various developments in Europe and Latin America, President Roosevelt's foreign policy toward Latin America moved away from the long-term and elite-centered approach espoused by the CRD, in favor of addressing immediate wartime interests through Nelson Rockefeller's campaign of "going to the people." That they

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10. J. Manuel Espinosa, *Inter-American Beginnings of US Cultural Diplomacy 1936-1948* (Washington, DC, 1976).

11. Charles Thomson, quoted in J. Manuel Espinosa, *Inter-American Beginnings*, 209.

12. Espinosa, *Inter-American Beginnings*, 163.

13. Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Dulles, VA, 2005), 57.

were acknowledging previously unrecognized groups in their foreign policy considerations seemed to mitigate the uncomfortable fact that this was propaganda after all, which was paternalistic and heavy-handed, and deployed specifically in cases where the “will of the people” could not be trusted. As an outreach to the masses, this campaign was considered to be egalitarian, even democratic, within these circles. Indeed, this new approach was seen as part of a broader effort to “democratize” international affairs, fitting neatly within an emerging liberal internationalism.

#### THE GERMAN THREAT IN MEXICO

For a variety of reasons, U.S. statesmen and policy makers identified Mexico as the frontline in the battle for the hearts and minds of the people of Latin America. There was the close proximity to the United States, which raised the specter of Mexico being used as a staging ground for a potential Axis invasion. Then there was the fact that America’s southern neighbor was a rich repository for raw materials vital to the U.S. war effort. Finally, U.S. intelligence indicated that fascist propaganda was fast gaining a foothold in Mexico with groups suspected of having direct ties with Nazi fascism such as the Spanish Falange expanding their influence. These rightist groups were apparently exploiting the anti-Americanism lingering from recent disputes involving foreign control over Mexican oil to win over converts.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, U.S. officials took German activities in Mexico and in Latin America seriously; they believed German propaganda had laid the foundation for the conquest of continental Europe and that the Germans intended to employ the same strategy in the Americas. President Franklin Roosevelt echoed these concerns in his opening remarks to Congress in 1941. “We learn much from the lessons of the past years in Europe.... The first phase of the invasion of this hemisphere would not be the landing of regular troops. The necessary strategic points would be occupied by secret agents and their dupes—and a great number of them are already here.” While this threat was somewhat exaggerated by Roosevelt, the Nazi state had organized a propaganda campaign, primarily through their embassy in Mexico. Herr Arthur Dietrich led the German propaganda drive in Mexico as the press attaché for the German embassy. In the beginning, nearly all of the German propaganda was devoted to preserving the loyalty of the German expatriate community in Mexico. To accomplish this, the German legation in Mexico arranged art exhibits, films, sporting events, circulated periodicals such as the *Diario Alemán* and transmitted radio programs from both Germany and

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14. On the Fascist threat in Mexico and Latin America, see Friedrich Katz, et al. *Hitler sobre América Latina: el fascismo alemán en Latinoamérica, 1933-1943* (Mexico City, 1968); María Emilia Paz, *Strategy, Security, and Spies: Mexico and the U.S. as Allies in World War II* (University Park, PA, 1997); Aaron W. Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1954* (University Park, PA, 2010), 125–27.

local radio stations.<sup>15</sup> However, in 1938, with the threat of war looming, Germany sent a new directive to Mexico, ordering Dietrich to wage a campaign for the support, or at the very least, the neutrality, of the Mexican people.<sup>16</sup>

Resources for the Mexican propaganda came from the local German colony and Germany itself, at the rate of approximately thirty thousand pesos a month. Dietrich also directed advertising revenues spent by the German business community in Mexico. These revenues were used as an incentive to get Mexican newspapers to publish favorable news coverage of the Axis powers. German propaganda agents allocated funds to a diverse set of publications. Perhaps the most ambitious effort involved German financial backing of a weekly magazine in Mexico City called *El Timón*, edited by prominent Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos.<sup>17</sup> In addition, German news wire services, the Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro and the Transocean News Services, provided free or subsidized services to Mexican papers, particularly smaller, regional papers, believed to be susceptible to financial inducement. But German involvement in the Mexican media came to an abrupt end on June 12, 1940, when the Mexican Foreign Ministry informed the German minister that press attaché Dietrich was *persona non grata* to the Mexican government, and was immediately expelled from the country. The Mexican government also shut down the German headquarters responsible for the propaganda operations and dismissed the thirty member staff employed by Dietrich.

Seeking to maximize his leverage over the United States so as to ensure a favorable settlement with the U.S. oil companies whose holdings had been expropriated in 1938 and to extract trade and economic concessions in return for Mexico's wartime assistance, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas intentionally withheld making a formal declaration of allegiance.<sup>18</sup> There were also real and significant tensions in U.S.-Mexican relations at this time, which had been strained not only by the oil expropriation crisis but also by worries with what some American observers considered to be the radical domestic agenda of the Cárdenas government, which included land redistribution, implementing socialist education, and supporting workers' rights.<sup>19</sup> However, by 1940, Roosevelt had given the Cárdenas government assurances of a favorable settlement to the oil

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15. Alton Frye, *Nazi Germany and American Hemisphere, 1933-1941* (New Haven, CT, 1967), 15–31.

16. Gellman, *Good Neighbor Diplomacy*, 105–16.

17. Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front: The Battle of Europe Versus America* (Norman, OK, 1942), 300.

18. Cárdenas clearly had misgivings of Hitler's Germany but throughout this period he held his cards close to his vest in order to play off the great powers to Mexico's benefit. Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt*, 113–72.

19. On Cárdenas' domestic program, see Hector Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989* (Austin, TX, 1993), 129–58; Mary Kay Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson, AZ, 1997).

expropriation. At the same time, Germany had reneged on promises to provide financial and technical assistance. In light of these developments, Cárdenas made both public and private overtures to FDR's administration signaling Mexico's allegiance to the United States including a government ban on German and Japanese propaganda activities.<sup>20</sup> Cárdenas' successor Manuel Ávila Camacho formalized the alliance by declaring war on the Axis powers in May 1942, and further entrenched bilateral ties with the United States by tying Mexican industrial development explicitly to American war aims.<sup>21</sup>

The expulsion of Dietrich and the government crackdown on his operations did not however, end Axis propaganda activities in Mexico. General Franco's agents organized the Falange in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America to continue to encourage support for the Axis powers in the Western Hemisphere. The message of "Hispanidad," which invoked a shared historical and cultural heritage between Mexico and Spain, initially gained the support of a large majority of the Spanish community in Mexico—the single largest foreign population nearing fifty thousand.<sup>22</sup> The Spanish colony in Mexico formed an influential commercial and entrepreneurial group, which tended to be politically conservative and staunchly Catholic, and thus disaffected by the center-left policies of the Cárdenas government. Consequently, Mexicans of Spanish heritage were predisposed to support the Falange and General Franco.

In the wake of Dietrich's expulsion, the Falange emerged as the primary disseminator of pro-Axis propaganda in Mexico. Members of the Spanish community and Franco's Spanish government donated funds for the propaganda operation. As with earlier German propaganda, this included the organization of conferences, motion picture films, press materials, as well as the operation of Spanish schools and cultural centers.<sup>23</sup> However, in contrast to German efforts, nearly all the Spanish propaganda attempted to exploit the anti-Americanism among the Mexican people, which was still running high following the national expropriation of foreign oil. The lingering anti-American sentiments could be seen, for example, in posters found hung up throughout Mexico City that read:

Spain, the mother country, left us a legacy the territories of Upper California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, which the United States has stolen from us. Do you wish to go to war at the side of such a country?<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup>. On Mexico's policing and surveillance of Axis propaganda activities during World War II, see Katz, et al. *Hitler sobre América Latina*; Paz, *Strategy, Security, and Spies*, 123–34; and Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico*, 125–27.

<sup>21</sup>. The declaration of war against the Axis alliance was made after German submarines sunk two Mexican merchant ships in the Gulf of Mexico in the summer of 1942.

<sup>22</sup>. NARA, RG 229, Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs Division of Reports, "The Falange in Mexico," February 21, 1942.

<sup>23</sup>. NARA, RG 229, "Falange in Mexico."

<sup>24</sup>. NARA, 820.02/E-14048, October 21, 1941.

In April 1939, the Falange organized rallies in Mexico City and Veracruz to celebrate General Franco's entrance into Madrid and to pledge their allegiance to his Spanish government. German and Italian ministers were in attendance as honorary guests. The next month, the Cárdenas government, which supported the Republican government in Spain during the Civil War, responded by banning the Falange from Mexico.<sup>25</sup> Yet, despite government censorship, the leadership of the Falange continued to operate underground.

U.S. intelligence indicated close ties between the Spanish Falange and the Unión Nacional Sinarquista and the Acción Nacional. The *Sinarquistas* boasted a membership of a half a million, primarily from the campesino class. Catholic clergymen with the support of the Archbishop of Mexico formed the group and its primary goal was to oppose socialist education in Mexican schools. Although the movement espoused a highly anti-American rhetoric, there was no direct link between the Falange and the *Sinarquistas*. In fact, Archbishop Luis María Martínez ordered the removal of all elements of the Falange from the Catholic Church in 1942.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, claims that directly connected the Falange to Acción Nacional appear dubious as well. Organized in 1938 by Manuel Gómez Morin, the party drew support from middle and upper class Mexican professionals. As with the *Sinarquistas*, the conservative Acción Nacional opposed socialist education, government management of business, and the Cárdenas government's land redistribution program. And like the *Sinarquistas*, the Acción Nacional disavowed association with foreign totalitarian models, rejecting both fascism and communism. As proof of the Catholic group's loyalty to the Mexican government, the Board of Directors of Acción Nacional adopted a statement, in lieu of Mexico's entrance into the war that declared, "All Mexicans and all their organizations have only one duty – that of bringing about a strong and firm national unity in the great common effort which the war necessitates . . . and subordinating all activities toward this aim."<sup>27</sup>

The success of the Germany blitzkrieg, which steamrolled across Western Europe in 1940, made the propaganda campaign in Mexico less of a priority, and thus less and less German resources were devoted there. This prompted Baron Rüdt von Kollenberg, the German minister in Mexico, to complain in 1940: "Due to the lack of sufficient funds day after day we are losing ground, one newspaper after the other gets lost and yields to hostile financial pressure. In this country all newspapers and most journalists expect cash for cooperation, as

<sup>25</sup>. On Cárdenas moral and material support for the Republican government in the Spanish Civil War, see Amelia Marie Kiddie, "La Política Del Buen Amigo: Mexican-Latin American Relations During the Presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 2010), 92–139.

<sup>26</sup>. NARA, RG 229, Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs Division Reports, "Sinarquismo in Mexico," February 21, 1942.

<sup>27</sup>. NARA 812.00/32072, Letter from Herbert S. Bursley to the U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, November 4, 1942.

obviously the other side is offering plentiful.”<sup>28</sup> Germany’s military successes had, conversely, compelled the British and the French to beef up their propaganda operations in Mexico.<sup>29</sup> Rockefeller’s OCIAA overtook both of these efforts in 1942, with British agents remaining on in the role of consultants and advisers. The agency’s objective was to counter Nazi propaganda, project favorable messages or themes relating to U.S. war aims, and ultimately, to ensure the support of the Mexican people in the U.S. war effort.

#### FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN THE MEXICAN PRESS

In 1942, Guy W. Ray, the press attaché for the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, reported, “even the worst of the former bad boys get the point and have agreed to cooperate. By and large the Press appears to be predisposed to follow the lead of the Government.”<sup>30</sup> By this account, a rather dramatic turnaround had taken place. In the years leading up to U.S. entry into the war, officials at the American embassy in Mexico were disturbed at what they perceived to be an increasingly pro-Axis and anti-American slant in the news and editorial coverage of the Mexican press. The Inter-Allied Committee (formed earlier by the British and the French) and later the OCIAA mounted a concerted campaign to influence the news and editorial coverage of the war in Mexico. In early 1942, the U.S. State Department carried out a comprehensive survey in Latin America to get a rough sense of Nazi influence in political and economic circles in Mexico. One of the major outcomes of this survey was the decision to assemble a formal government “black list,” which effectively prohibited business relations between U.S. companies and those businesses or organizations reported on the list. The U.S. Embassy made it clear to the owners of Mexican newspapers that accepting advertising revenues from German sources would mean an end to American advertising dollars.<sup>31</sup>

The strategy to use American advertising dollars as a carrot was initially hampered by acute shortages in U.S. consumer products. The lack of saleable American goods meant less advertising monies to influence Mexican editors. Nevertheless, the U.S. government encouraged American companies to advertise in Mexico by allowing them to take tax deductions for advertising expenditures in Latin America.<sup>32</sup> A group of U.S. advertisers doing business in Mexico offered to replace all German advertising revenues with American dollars.<sup>33</sup> The owners and

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28. Quote in Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt*, 148–49.

29. On British propaganda activities in Mexico during the war, see Niblo, “British Propaganda in Mexico during the Second World War,” and his *Mexico in the 1940s*, 311–60.

30. NARA 812.911/467, Letter from Guy W. Ray to Cordell Hull, December 11, 1942.

31. NARA, RG 229, Mexico Central Files (Radio Division), Letter from Guy W. Ray to John C. Dreier, July 8, 1942.

32. Joe Alex Morris, *Nelson Rockefeller: A Biography* (New York, 1960), 175.

33. NARA, RG 229, Mexico Central Files (Radio), Letter from the Advertising Group in Mexico to the U.S. office of Censorship, April 24, 1942.

editors of the major dailies in Mexico City, including *El Universal, Excelsior, Novedades, La Prensa*, and major regional papers such as *El Norte, El Dictamen, and El Mundo*, agreed to this arrangement.

But soon after the offer was accepted, the U.S. Embassy came out against it. George S. Messersmith, the highly respected U.S. ambassador to Mexico, argued vehemently against such overt interventions, arguing that it would reek of heavy-handedness.<sup>34</sup> Members of the Embassy were also skeptical of the business group's promise of replacing the deficit from withdrawn German advertising. The alternative was to allocate specific funds from the OCIAA's budget to purchase news and editorial space. However, following lengthy discussions, the idea of direct subsidies was also rejected on the ground that it might induce higher advertising costs for U.S. businesses. In the end, the OCIAA and the Embassy agreed to continue encouraging U.S. business advertisements in Mexico, divert these revenues to pro-American papers, but refused to make any promises to replace German advertising.<sup>35</sup> The launching of U.S. radio programming in Mexico reinforced the decision: A substantial advertising budget would accompany the radio campaign, thus providing an additional pot of revenue from which to subsidize Mexican papers.

The OCIAA also sustained earlier efforts of the Inter-Allied Committee subsidizing news wire services to the Mexican news agency, ANTA. Beginning in 1939, the Franco-British Inter-Allied Committee provided news-wire services to ANTA at a substantially reduced rate.<sup>36</sup> British and French propaganda agents filtered the news to ensure that only news favorable to the Allies reached Mexican newspapers. While continuing the Allies financial support of the ANTA news agency, the OCIAA also offered subsidies for the news-wire services of the *Associated Press, United Press*, and the *New York Times*. U.S. government reports showed that nearly forty-five percent of all foreign items in Mexican City newspapers (this number was a bit higher in newspapers outside of the city) originated from the three news agencies that were controlled by American interests. If the services of the ANTA news agency are included in this figure, then the number rises to nearly eighty percent.<sup>37</sup>

However, these financial incentives failed to induce the favorable news coverage that U.S. officials were hoping for. Mexican City newspapers *Hombre Libre* and *Omega*, for example, continued their scathing attacks on the United States.<sup>38</sup> As a

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34. On the turf wars between the U.S. Embassy and the OCIAA in Mexico during the war, see NARA 812.911/311, Letter from Kent Cooper to Undersecretary Laurence Duggan, April 16, 1941; and Jesse H. Stiller, *George S. Messersmith, Diplomat of Diplomacy* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987).

35. NARA, RG 229, Mexico Central Files (Radio), Letter from John W.G. Ogilvie to James R. Woodul, December 11, 1942.

36. On British propaganda activities in Mexico during World War II, see Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, 311–60.

37. NARA 812.911/314, June 23, 1941.

38. NARA 812.00.911/350, Letter from U.S. Consulate Office in Yucatán to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, March 10, 1942.

result, U.S. officials in Mexico decided to take a harder line against recalcitrant Mexican newspapers.

Mr. Ray has had successful conferences with the editors of the State and metropolitan papers, in which he has tactfully explained that we are engaged in a war against unscrupulous enemies, and that much as he regrets it, where any hostility to the United States is started or continued we not only cannot help them obtain newsprint, but will have to exercise all means at our disposal to cut off their supply. On the other hand if they want to play ball with us we will use every means to assist them.<sup>39</sup>

The war in Europe brought almost all trading to a halt, including newsprint and paper. As a result, Mexico acquired most of the country's newsprint through two Canadian companies. Newsprint purchases were made through the Productora e Importadora de Papel, S.A. (PIPSA), founded in 1935 as a government organ for the purpose of importing newsprint and paper for the Mexican press, duty free. The U.S. embassy obtained an agreement that required PIPSA to maintain a record of the newspapers receiving newsprint from the agency. Additionally, the embassy reached an agreement with the Canadian companies that allowed the U.S. embassy to refuse print and paper deliveries to uncooperative newspapers. By threatening to withhold print from nonconforming newspapers, U.S. officials wielded this power to coax changes in the news and editorial coverage in Mexico.

Cárdenas' successor Manuel Ávila Camacho reinforced this effort by threatening to start his own newspaper in Mexico City, unless coverage of the major Mexican dailies showed a demonstrable shift. The new Mexican president had presented himself as a staunch U.S. ally, declaring war on the Axis powers in 1942. Following his election in 1940, Manuel Ávila Camacho had set Mexico on a course of economic modernization and political authoritarianism. By entering a wartime alliance with the United States, his regime was able to secure the technical, economic, and trade assistance needed to consolidate a postrevolutionary state that was shifting steadily rightwards.<sup>40</sup> In emphasizing pro-growth policies and moderating his predecessor's policies, Manuel Ávila Camacho re-established the "ideological congruence" that had characterized U.S.-Mexico relations before the oil expropriation crisis of 1938.<sup>41</sup> As part of his turn to authoritarianism, Ávila Camacho had demanded the full support of the Mexican press, enforcing a de facto government censorship of the press. Learning of the president's plans to establish a newspaper as an official organ of the state, the heads of the leading

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39. NARA 812.00/213, Letter from Dudley T. Easby, Jr. to Wallace K. Harrison, March 14, 1942.

40. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development*, 89–100.

41. On the "ideological congruence" that served as the basis for friendly U.S.-Mexico relations during the first half of the twentieth century, see Alan Knight, *U.S.-Mexico Relations, 1910-1940* (La Jolla, CA, 1987).

papers in Mexico City, including *Excelsior*, *El Universal*, *Novedades*, and *La Prensa*, agreed not to directly criticize his presidency and guaranteed a pro-Allies news and editorial coverage in 1942.

The pressures exerted by U.S. officials and the Mexican state worked quite effectively in the case of *Ultimas Noticias*, the afternoon version of *Excelsior*. The director general Rodrigo de Llano and business manager Gilberto Figueroa of *Excelsior* were invited to the U.S. embassy, where officials expressed their displeasure over the paper's attacks on the United States. They made it known that it "might endanger the informal friendly agreement through which PIPSA could import newsprint into Mexico without difficulty."<sup>42</sup> In response to this threat, De Llano and Figueroa agreed to make it clear to the editorial staff of *Ultimas Noticias* that the paper must be friendly to the United States. A short time later, Guy Ray reported happily to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull "since the time [of the meeting] the policy of *Ultimas Noticias* has been on the whole entirely satisfactory."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, *Ultimas Noticias* represented an exception in this matter. A majority of the newspapers that the OCIAA defined as antagonistic at the time of the meeting, even with the explicit threat to their businesses, refused to bow to U.S. and Mexican state pressures. And they exploited various tactics to do so. Some Mexican newspapers like *Hombre Libre* and *Omega* flatly ignored the threats and continued to publish anti-American editorials and news. In the case of the *Diario de Yucatán*, an influential regional newspaper, the owner exerted political influence rendering U.S. threats innocuous.<sup>44</sup> In other instances, newspapers used more subtle methods to avoid U.S. reprisal. *El Mundo*, for example, as the U.S. Consulate in Tampico reported, "presents the news in such a way as to create a bad impression. Events favorable to the Axis powers are headlined while those favorable to the Allied causes are generally hidden away in the inner pages."<sup>45</sup> This strategy involved increasing the volume of pro-American articles, but at the same while, situating those articles in the back pages of the paper. This subtle tactic worked well in most places outside of Mexico City, where consular offices lacked sufficient staff to undertake a sophisticated analysis of the daily news. In most offices, reports consisted of a straight count of pro-American, pro-Axis, and neutral articles.<sup>46</sup> Within the landscape of the Mexican newspaper community, papers favoring the Axis were a small minority; nevertheless, papers that did choose to support the Axis did so, despite U.S. and Mexican state pressures.

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<sup>42</sup>. NARA 812.911/487, Letter from Guy Ray to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, December 11, 1942. Interestingly, U.S. officials chastised *Ultimas Noticias'* news coverage for insinuations or "veiled" attacks rather than open opposition.

<sup>43</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>. NARA 812.911/350. Letter from the U.S. Consulate in Yucatán, to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, March 10, 1942.

<sup>45</sup>. NARA 812.911/345. Letter from the U.S. Consulate in Tampico, to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, March 10, 1942.

<sup>46</sup>. NARA 812.911/311. A letter to Laurence Duggan, May 2, 1941.

## RADIO PROPAGANDA AND SURVEYING POPULAR OPINION

At the Buenos Aires Convention in 1936, the United States and the nations of Latin America agreed on the principle of nonintervention in the Western Hemisphere. Convention participants also agreed on what later became known as the “Consultative Pact,” an agreement under which the American nations agreed to consult with one another in the event that the peace of the hemisphere was threatened. In addition to hemispheric defense, American delegates introduced proposal to create a “Pan-American” radio hour. The radio proposal was to be part of a broader effort to enhance cultural relations between the nations of the Americas. Despite the fact that several nations (including Mexico) showed interest in the idea, the delegates returned to the United States without a definitive agreement on the radio proposal.<sup>47</sup> In the United States, disputes between private radio conglomerates and President Roosevelt’s administration stalled efforts to provide short wave radio programming to Latin America. But the exigency of war facilitated a détente between the government and the radio industry. The OCIAA and major U.S. radio conglomerates, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), went on to collaborate to transmit radio propaganda programming to Latin America. This joint radio project was a crucial component of the OCIAA’s campaign to reach broader cross-sections of the Latin American population.

U.S. officials began circulating the plan for radio propaganda in Mexico at the end of 1941. The beginnings of the OCIAA radio project in Mexico were modest. The OCIAA sponsored a radio program, to be hosted by Leo Carrillo, from a studio in Mexico City. Carrillo was an American film actor of Mexican descent and was a popular figure in Mexico. The initial proposal called for a series of programs, each about fifteen to thirty minutes in length, to be broadcasted three times a week. The programs consisted of Mexican music and commentaries on international news.<sup>48</sup> The radio proposal, however, faced an early roadblock when American officials learned that Emilio Azcárraga held controlling influence within the Mexican radio industry. U.S. officials had earlier classified the media mogul as a pro-Nazi sympathizer.<sup>49</sup> The OCIAA thus made the recommendation to have Azcárraga’s businesses “blacklisted.” This recommendation was based on several allegations, including accusations that Azcárraga received financial subsidies from German sources, employed German and pro-fascist personnel, and worst of all, used his radio stations as a cover to transmit encoded instructions from the German secret service into Mexico.<sup>50</sup> Officials, nevertheless, chose not to cancel

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47. Fejes, *Imperialism, Media, and The Good Neighbor*, 63–109.

48. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter to Wallace Harrison, December 19, 1941.

49. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Coordination Committee of Mexico to Nelson Rockefeller, August 29, 1942.

50. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Don Francisco to Mr. Robbins, October 7, 1941.

U.S. sponsored broadcasts on his radio stations, fearing that any cancellation might cause "serious resentment and repercussions from Sr. Azcarraga."<sup>51</sup> Instead, press attaché Ray arranged several meetings with Azcárraga to ascertain his allegiances. His conversations with Azcárraga convinced him that the charges made against Azcárraga were unfounded. Indeed, Ray reported to Nelson Rockefeller that, "Azcarraga is really friendly to the United States."<sup>52</sup>

Following its decision to work with Azcárraga, the OCIAA vastly expanded radio operations in Mexico. By mid-1942, Mexican radio stations XEW, XEQ, as well as forty-five other stations throughout Mexico were airing American propaganda.<sup>53</sup> Ambassador Messersmith discussed the implementation of the U.S. radio program with Mexican officials, who offered their full support for the project. He noted in 1942 that: "The officials of the Mexican government are in complete accord with the foreign policy of the United States and are cooperating with this government magnificently."<sup>54</sup> The Mexican government also assisted U.S. radio efforts through the Office of Communication, which led efforts to eliminate Nazi competition on the Mexican airways. The Office was authorized to revoke the broadcasting license of any station believed to have "German ties," which the agency did in the case of one R. Junco de la Vega, as reported by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in August 1942.

The broadcasting license was held by a Mexican named R. Junco de la Vega, who is the editor and publisher of the pro-Nazi newspaper "El Sol", at Monterrey. It was stated the Vega has been investigated by the Mexican Government and that as a result of the investigation, Maximino Camacho, the Secretary of Communications, and brother of President Manuel Avila Camacho, has intimated that he intends to cancel the present broadcasting permit for station XEG. However, it was said that Camacho has indicated that although the license will be cancelled because of the pro-Nazi sympathies and writings of Vega, a new license will be issued to some Pro-American Mexican citizen.<sup>55</sup>

In October 1942, the OCIAA held internal talks considering the expansion of U.S. radio propaganda into the Mexican countryside. The allegiance of the people of the Mexican interior was an acute source of concern for U.S. officials. As John Jensen of the OCIAA radio division noted: "These interior cities are the most important in Mexico and they were very carefully selected to provide

51. Ibid.

52. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Guy Ray to Secretary of the State Cordell Hull, January 14, 1942.

53. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Philip H. Watts to Don Francisco, July 2, 1942.

54. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Carr P. Collins to Murrey Brophy, February 23, 1942.

55. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from J. Edgar Hoover – Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation to Nelson Rockefeller, August 11, 1942.

good coverage in the entire republic . . . to supplement the intense coverage provided by XEW and XEQ.”<sup>56</sup> NBC and CBS, coordinating with the OCIAA, produced and transmitted local radio programs and short and long wave radio programming from the United States into the Mexican countryside.

Information about the radio audience in Mexico was scant and whatever did exist was considered unreliable. For instance, statistics about radio ownership in Mexico varied widely, depending on the source. However, surveys performed by U.S. companies provided a few general trends about this listening market. Survey data showed that radio technology was becoming more accessible to the “lower” classes and was no longer the monopoly of the Mexican elite.<sup>57</sup> The results also revealed that the radio audience for short wave transmission from Mexico was very limited. Based on this thin knowledge of the Mexican radio market, the OCIAA allocated an extensive advertising budget. It allocated advertising resources almost exclusively to promote short wave radio programs being transmitted from U.S. radio stations.<sup>58</sup> The advertising campaign included ads in Mexican newspapers and magazines, radio spot announcements, and OCIAA printed publicity.<sup>59</sup>

One of the first actions taken by NBC and CBS radio officials was to modify Mexican radio programming standards so that they conformed to American industry standards. NBC and CBS executives believed that the Mexican radio industry devoted far too much airtime to commercials or spot announcements, and not enough to actual programming. U.S. officials circulated copies of the *Code of National Association of Broadcasters* to leading radio stations in the country and made sure that U.S. radio programs placed on Mexican airtime conformed to industry best practices.<sup>60</sup> Another common heard criticism had to do with the outdated technology and infrastructure of the Mexican radio industry. In 1942, for example, the Coordination Committee for Mexico complained to Rockefeller that: “Sound effects is one of the principal defects of radio production in Mexico,” adding that “the sound men are entirely inexperienced, and the sound effects records they have here are old and have no variety. . . .”<sup>61</sup>

Appealing to nationalist sentiments, the OCIAA solicited U.S. companies for corporate sponsorships. The collaboration of U.S. multinational firms served the dual purpose of decreasing programming costs to the OCIAA and, simultaneously,

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56. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from John C. Jensen to Paul R. Kruming, October 10, 1942.

57. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Coordination Committee of Mexico to Nelson Rockefeller, August 29, 1942.

58. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from W.C. Logan to Nelson Rockefeller, October 21, 1942.

59. See *Novedades*, January 2, 1943; *Excelsior*, December 21, 1942; *La Prensa*, January 2, 1943; and *Universal* January 14, 1943.

60. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Don Francisco to James Woodul, October 30, 1942.

61. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Coordination Committee for Mexico to Nelson Rockefeller, March 1, 1943.

laid the groundwork for U.S. commercial penetration of Mexico after the war. But U.S. companies were wary of investing in commercial advertisements over the radio because executives did not want to put money into unknown markets. A combination of factors led to a change in their attitudes. First, in 1943, the OCIAA began conducting regional surveys in Mexico every few months in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the Mexican radio audience, making its markets measurable to U.S. corporate heads.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, with the protracted war in Europe and the South Pacific showing little signs of ending, Mexico as well as other parts of Latin America represented one of the few opportunities for U.S. businesses to expand into foreign markets. By the war's end, the Sydney Ross Company, Good Year Tires, Phillips, General Electric, and Coca-Cola had all agreed to sponsor U.S. radio programs in Mexico.<sup>63</sup>

The radio programs aired by NBC and CBS in Mexico varied only slightly, with international news and music selections comprising the main items. U.S. officials criticized programmers for the lack of variety: "One must remember that the great bulk of Mexican people, perhaps as high as 85 to 90%, are very poor and have little interest of what is going on in the outside world. This is one of the things we should bear in mind with regards to programs sent to Mexico."<sup>64</sup> OCIAA officials suggested tailoring programs to the different audiences listening throughout the day. The radio division responded by producing radio segments on women's programs, children's music, game shows, medical advice, and English language training. They aired programs on beauty, fashion, food, childcare, and American women in the defense industry during the morning hours targeting Mexican housewives.<sup>65</sup> During after-school hours, composers sang children's songs and told fairy tale stories as part of the children's program.<sup>66</sup>

However, the OCIAA's lack of knowledge regarding certain aspects of Mexican life undermined U.S. radio propaganda. One such issue came to light after airing programming for a more than a year. OCIAA officials learned that radio programs were being transmitted to cities and towns that went without power for long stretches of the day and were therefore unable to receive the transmission of scheduled U.S. radio programs. In light of some of these issues, the U.S. State Department recommended conducting surveys periodically. At first, both officials from the Embassy and the Coordination Committee strongly rejected the idea, arguing that the State Department "does not give a sound reason for any need

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62. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Ambassador George Messersmith to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, July 29, 1942.

63. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, August 29, 1944.

64. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, January 23 1943.

65. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Don Francisco to James Woodul, February 26, 1942.

66. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, January 23 1943.

for such a survey in Mexico," adding that: "the members of the Sub-Committee on Communications are men who have had many years of experience in the radio business in Mexico."<sup>67</sup>

These objections led to the recommendation being shelved but a new round of criticisms would force it back on the table a year later, when the U.S. State Department censured the OCIAA for "not doing anything in Mexico."<sup>68</sup> Private media consultants added details to this critique of the OCIAA propaganda program. "With every US success on the battlefield and every awesome announcement of gigantic plane and ship production, apprehension of the nearby Colossus grows in Mexico. Unfortunately Nelson Rockefeller's propaganda does too little to combat this fear. The sheer might of the US is overstressed."<sup>69</sup> Emilio Azcárraga, likewise, voiced disapproval, arguing that the propaganda campaign, as it was constituted, offended more than it persuaded. He contended that the saturation point for the propaganda exceeded the listening patience of the Mexican audience. For Azcárraga, the problem was not with the content of the propaganda, but with the volume. These concerns about the project's effectiveness renewed calls for survey research.

Following World War I, the advent of surveys, polls, and other techniques of statistical measurement helped to give rise to the social sciences, which in turn helped to define the "averaged American" and, in the aggregate, a mass public in the United States. This was a time when statistic methods began to achieve legitimacy, hegemony even, as tools to represent social reality. Through objective analysis of statistical data, abstractions like a mass public and national culture became quantifiable and knowable, revealing to Americans who they were and what they believed.<sup>70</sup> By the time of the Second World War, these social scientific methods and expertise, honed and refined for more than two decades now, would be brought to bear in Mexico and other places in Latin America to discern the "true" thoughts and beliefs of people elsewhere. It was assumed that social sciences tools for knowing were universal and thus applicable everywhere. But what applied in America did not necessarily apply in Mexico, as surveyors would quickly discover. Local exigencies forced experts to modify their methods and techniques, which led to outcomes that did not necessarily conform to their expectations. This gave policy makers and experts pause about what exactly they were measuring and if, in fact, it was representative of Mexican popular opinion.

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67. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Ambassador George Messersmith to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, July 29, 1942.

68. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Victor Borella to Thomas Sutherland, October 30, 1943.

69. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Memorandum: M-2077 Local Activities, September 14, 1943. The quote is from the August issue of Fortune Magazine written by media consultant Florence Horn.

70. Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

In 1943, the OCIAA received additional appropriations to mount a nationwide radio survey. During the development stage, professional surveyors designed questions in order to ascertain the size and composition of the radio listening market, the listening habits of the Mexican radio audience, the popularity of Mexican radio stations, and the popularity of U.S. programs relative to Mexican ones.<sup>71</sup> At this time in the United States, survey researchers performed a majority of their research through telephone interviews but in Mexico, telephone ownership was not nearly as widespread. As a result, the survey was divided between two methodologies, telephone interviewing, and door-to-door house interviewing. A team composed of eighteen trained interviewers began going from house to house interviewing Mexican households. However, following a few days of data collection, OCIAA's radio chief, Hebert Cerwin, deemed the data unreliable.

The people did not remember exactly what program they had listened to the previous night, and in many instances gave programs that had not been on the air. Some people deliberately lied or gave answers that first entered their heads. We continued this method for a full week to give it a thorough test, but finally had to abandon this method of approach.<sup>72</sup>

To address these problems, the OCIAA surveyors conducted interviews during evening hours when Mexicans were listening to their radios. But interviewers had trouble gaining access to Mexican homes during this time of the day. Thus, in the end, the OCIAA resorted to a convoluted scheme to get around these problems, which Hebert Cerwin described in detail to Nelson Rockefeller in 1943.

Six interviewers each with a portable battery radio set and a flashlight are assigned to a cross section of the city. At 7 PM they turn on their radios and start out at a fast pace. As they pass each house where a radio is turn on, they tune in their own portable to this program, establish the station and the time and make a record of it. Then each continues to the next house where a radio is on. In one block, a single checker has been able to establish the station and identify the programs of 100 sets.<sup>73</sup>

This highly unorthodox survey methodology, to say the least, produced an unreliable data set. Thus, the final report failed to draw conclusions on the size and composition of the Mexican radio audience. Nevertheless, the research did shed some light on issues regarding the relative popularity of U.S. radio programs compared to Mexican ones. Its findings showed U.S. propaganda programs receiving the lowest audience ratings. During telephone interviews, Mexicans complained that they "didn't like all the propaganda our shows contain, that

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71. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Walter Krause to James Woodul, March 8, 1943.

72. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, March 10, 1943.

73. Ibid.

they are too heavily weighed.”<sup>74</sup> Subsequent survey results confirmed these initial findings. In defense, OCIAA officials contended that the ratings for their programs were respectable considering that they contained propaganda and “American” themes. In raising these considerations, agents of the OCIAA Radio Division were attempting to manage expectations.

#### HOLLYWOOD, SOUND TRUCKS, AND MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES

OCIAA staff members believed that while the newspaper and radio programs were effective on one level, they still left a preponderance of the popular classes outside their influence. While newsprint and radio were becoming more accessible to the general Mexican population, U.S. officials maintained that these forms of media overlooked large segments of Mexican society.<sup>75</sup> In order to extend the reach of American propaganda, the OCIAA experimented with other media techniques to persuade the Mexican masses. Some of these efforts included a cartoon magazine drawn by leading Mexican cartoonists depicting caricatures of Nazi leaders and promoting hemispheric unity. OCIAA agents also discovered posters were popular among the masses, often used as wall decorations in Mexican homes.<sup>76</sup> Though the production of this type of print paraphernalia continued throughout the war, officials continued to be sanguine about the program’s reach. It was at this point the U.S. government turned to Hollywood.

The prewar relationship between Hollywood and the U.S. government was a tense one. In 1938, the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department had filed an antitrust suit against eight of the largest Hollywood studios. But there was a thawing in relations beginning in 1941, when Hollywood executives and the U.S. Justice Department agreed to suspend the pending lawsuit until the end of the war.<sup>77</sup> Aside from the immediate benefit of the suspension of the lawsuit, Hollywood based their decision to cooperate with the U.S. government on business interests. The war in Europe had closed off what was by far the largest foreign market for Hollywood films, approaching something close to seventy-five percent of Hollywood’s total international business. Consequently, the immediate concern for Hollywood was to find new markets as surrogates, at least until the war ended in Europe. Furthermore, the box office success of movies such as the Mexican produced feature *Simon Bolívar* demonstrated that the “right kind of movie” could be profitable in Latin America.<sup>78</sup> Patriotic considerations also figured into the

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74. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Survey on Radio Programs, July 1943.

75. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Letter from Henry S. Waterman to the Secretary of State Cordell Hull, February 11, 1943.

76. NARA 812.911/487, December 11, 1942.

77. Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood’s New Deal* (Philadelphia, PA, 1997), 143.

78. NARA, RG 229, Mexico Central Files (Film), August 22, 1942. *Simon Bolívar* opened in Caracas in two theatres, grossing almost \$40,000 in three weeks, already exceeding the total cost of production (\$30,000).

decision to collaborate with the government; perhaps the best example of this being Jack Warner, the head of Warner Brothers studios, whose memories of his Jewish family being persecuted by the Nazis turned the government film project into a personal crusade.<sup>79</sup>

The OCIAA conducted a general survey of Mexico's film industry in 1941. Its results indicated that Mexican theaters were all privately owned, and divided into six distinct categories, first run, second run, circuit, suburban, repeat, and all others. They also showed admission fees in Mexico City ranging from thirty centavos to three pesos, whereas in cities and towns outside of the capital, prices were a bit lower, ranging from ten centavos to two pesos. Most importantly, the survey revealed the growing importance of movie going to Mexican social life. As a summary of the survey findings explained: "To go to the cinema is a social event, all types of Mexicans attend the movies more or less regularly. In view of the fact that there are few entertainment facilities in Mexico, particularly in the interior, and also due to the fact that admission fees are within 'the reach' of the people, this type of entertainment has become an important factor in the lives of the Mexicans."<sup>80</sup> Mexican-produced films were popular and generated substantial box office revenue, outpacing foreign films, including those produced by Hollywood, in many cases. As a result, OCIAA officials took concerted steps to develop cordial relations with Mexican producers and directors. The OCIAA agreed to furnish the Mexican film industry with technological aid and assistance. In return, Mexican film companies offered to act as consultants on U.S. propaganda films produced for Mexicans and other Latin Americans.

The OCIAA committee and the embassy in Mexico established formal guidelines for Hollywood film producers and directors. These guidelines were based on three primary sources: prewar market research studies conducted by Hollywood studios, informal OCIAA surveys, and information gathered in consultation with Mexican filmmakers. OCIAA surveyors indicated that large segments of the Mexican population were apathetic toward the war. "By all classes of people I mean business men, lawyers, physicians, priests, retail merchants, hotel managers, clerks, salesmen, taxicab men, barbers, laborers, elevator boys and boot-blacks . . . from conversations with these people it is my impression that Mexico is a long way from being conscious of the war danger."<sup>81</sup> Edward Robbins of the OCIAA Film Division, therefore, insisted that the chief goal of the film propaganda program be to raise the overall level of consciousness of the war among ordinary Mexicans. "Show abstracts of views of actual combat in Russia and any other theatres of war, indicating particularly the destruction of homes, ransacking of homes, the killing of children, etc," he suggested, noting: "It is very

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79. Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.'s Campaign against Nazism* (New York, 1990).

80. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Office Memorandum, April 30, 1941.

81. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter to H. Walter Blumenthal, October 6, 1942.

important to bring the war right straight to the Mexican people through this type of pictures and they will understand the war danger easier, because they went through this same experience through their revolution.”<sup>82</sup>

As a significant trading partner and a major source of raw materials for the U.S. war effort, Mexico represented an ally of strategic importance. However, there was speculation among some Mexicans that the inflationary pressures and the shortage of consumer goods were a direct result of Mexico’s wartime alliance with the United States. Moreover, some critics viewed the U.S.-Mexican relationship as imperialism in the guise of a wartime partnership. In response to these charges, one of the guidelines called for the incorporation of images depicting the daily suffering of the civilian population in America. U.S. officials believed that films showing the sufferings of ordinary Americans would highlight a shared sacrifice.<sup>83</sup>

Other major themes contained in the propaganda films reflected the priorities of the State Department. Hollywood received instructions to project the message of hemispheric unity and to visualize the barbarism of Nazi totalitarianism, especially in German occupied territories. Disney animations such as *Tres Caballeros* expressed the common heritage shared by the countries of the Americas with an emphasis on freedom, liberty, and mutual respect and admiration. Hollywood titles including *Casablanca*, *Mrs. Miniver*, and *Sergeant York* depicted the menace that German Nazism posed to western civilization.

Aside from larger thematic concerns, U.S. officials also established specific guidelines relating to technical and aesthetic aspects of film production. Early market research studies conducted by Hollywood companies showed that “very clear exaggerations, misrepresentation of fact, over-playing of Latin characters, mispronunciation of Spanish are points that give rise to feelings none too favorable towards American producing companies and Americans in general.”<sup>84</sup> One OCIAA report suggested minimizing references to American benevolence in addressing the U.S. desire to establish close relations with Mexico.

In conversations with Mexicans . . . heard them remark that the phrase “good neighbors” has been over used. Whether correct in their opinion or not, many Mexicans feel that it would be more sincere and more effective on our part to avoid too much sugar coating. It is their feeling that most of the reasons for present American efforts to cooperate with and get along better with Mexico is a matter of enlightened self interest, and that altruistic motives are frankly not part of the setup. They, therefore, consider it would be less hypocritical on our part if we would eliminate the froth and stick to beer, so to speak. They obviously feel that a leopard cannot change his spots overnight and that if their

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82. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Edward H. Robbins to Francis Alstock, October 6, 1942.

83. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter to H. Walter Blumenthal, October 6, 1942.

84. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Memorandum: General Information on Motion Pictures in Mexico, April 30, 1941.

welfare has not been a matter of unselfish concern to us for 100 years, it could not have become so overnight.<sup>85</sup>

There were also concerns with the ability of certain sectors of Mexican population to comprehend the propaganda message. Officials alluded to the high percentage of illiteracy and the low levels of formal education among the Mexican people. These concerns were compounded by the fact that almost all U.S. films were shown with Spanish subtitles. Officials therefore instructed moviemakers to "explain in a very simple A B C language and slowly, using words that are understandable by eight year old children."<sup>86</sup> Another OCIAA study similarly depicted the Mexican people in childlike terms: "it must be borne in mind that the audiences reached by the trucks are preponderantly simple and uneducated people, and that in order to hold their interest, pictures must be full of action and must carry out a message easily understood."<sup>87</sup>

OCIAA officials acknowledged the difficulties involved in persuading the Mexican people and thus recognized the importance of customizing the content of U.S. films to the predilections of the Mexican audience. OCIAA officials therefore believed strict adherence to their guidelines was essential if the film program was to be effective. The first propaganda film debuted at the end of 1942. Prior to its release, the OCIAA went through an elaborate screening process. The films arrived at the U.S. Embassy where members of the staff and the OCIAA Committee viewed and judged film for its content. The films were also distributed to consulate offices scattered throughout Mexico. Keenly aware of their influence within Mexican society, the OCIAA also had Catholic leaders view and evaluate the films. As Francis Alstock of the Film Division noted in 1944: "In each city where there is a Cardinal, an Archbishop or a Bishop, private showings should be given to that prelate before showings for the general public are undertaken. Also, with the prelate's permission, it would be helpful if the film were shown privately to priests, nuns, and any other religious groups. We believe that, if it is possible to make such arrangements, the pictures will be assured an enthusiastic reception."<sup>88</sup>

The Mexican government at both the state and national levels collaborated with the OCIAA in promoting the film project. The Minister of Gobernación and future Mexican president Miguel Alemán was a staunch supporter of the OCIAA mission. "He expressed the hope that as rapid action could be taken as soon as possible to carry the program into effect. He has shown very great interest

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85. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter to H. Walter Blumenthal, October 6, 1942.

86. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Edward H. Robbins to Francis Alstock, October 6, 1942.

87. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from R.T. Crump to Nelson Rockefeller, January 28, 1943.

88. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Francis Alstock to James R. Woodul, May 30, 1944.

in it, as it is of particular interest to the Mexican Government in its endeavor to increase a feeling of responsibility and war consciousness in every possible way in Mexico," Ambassador Messersmith wrote to Secretary of State Cordell Hull in 1942.<sup>89</sup> In each of these cases, Mexican leaders like Manuel Ávila Camacho and Miguel Alemán were not simply being good allies; they lent their support to the OCIAA film project because it squared with their modernizing vision for Mexico and because it ultimately advanced the long-term interests of the postrevolutionary state. The films' references to mass consumption, public health, and personal hygiene encouraged modern habits and sensibilities among the Mexican masses, which facilitated the state's goal of constructing rational citizens for a modern polity.<sup>90</sup>

Military leaders also arranged for film showings at military schools and institutions across Mexico for the "enlightenment and edification of Mexican soldiers and civic guards."<sup>91</sup> The Mexican Minister of Education organized film exhibitions for public school children in Mexico City. School children in Mexico City were invited daily to view U.S. films at the Palace of Fine Arts. In 1943, the U.S. consulate office in Chihuahua reported organizing a similar exhibition for students there: "A very heavy program is envisaged for the next three weeks for all primary, secondary and high schools within a wide radius of the city."<sup>92</sup> As news of the film program spread, the U.S. embassy was inundated with requests for films from various Mexican groups. By the end of 1942, members of the OCIAA committee were arranging up to three film exhibitions a day.

Beyond Hollywood produced films, the OCIAA organized a network of sound trucks operated by transnational corporations to cover the interior or "backwater" regions of Mexico. In 1942, the Sydney Ross Company, a U.S. subsidiary, offered the use of twenty-six sound trucks equipped with sixteen millimeters projectors. They eventually reached an agreement with the embassy to hold outdoor film exhibitions across the Mexican countryside. Soon after, Colgate-Palmolive and Eastman Kodak contacted the OCIAA to offer similar services. The OCIAA committee equipped the sound trucks with Hollywood produced film shorts and newsreels. OCIAA officials also provided crew members with propaganda literature to distribute to the audience. U.S. officials organized specific tour routes for each sound truck, seeking to maximize coverage of Mexican countryside. In many cases, local Mexican officials came out to publicly endorse exhibitions and organized publicity to encourage turnout. The OCIAA also dispatched sound trucks for

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89. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Ambassador George S. Messersmith to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, August 26, 1942.

90. See Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt*; Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development*; and Fein, "Myths of Cultural Imperialism and Nationalism in Golden Age Mexican Cinema," in *Fragments of a Golden Age*, 159–98.

91. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Exhibition of American Patriotic Films in Chihuahua, February 4, 1943.

92. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), "Exhibition of American Patriotic Films in Chihuahua," February 4, 1943.

private showings at the request of workers' unions, campesino associations, and Catholic leagues, among other organizations. At the height of the program, U.S. multinational firms organized nearly five hundred exhibitions in over 130 towns to five hundred thousand people.<sup>93</sup>

Initiatives drawn up by transnational corporations were generally well received by government officials. OCIAA official Herbert Cerwin, for example, lauded "the fine cooperation given by American firms in the work we are doing in Mexico."<sup>94</sup> For U.S. multinationals thinking beyond the war, this was seen as an opportunity to make inroads into the Mexican consumer market. Along with the showing of films, these companies were given a chance to market and display company products at these events. These wartime activities laid the foundation for the dominance of postwar U.S. consumer culture, as Hollywood movies, Coca-Cola, and other American consumer goods would become a ubiquitous part of postwar Mexican society.<sup>95</sup>

OCIAA officials were pleased with the reach of the film propaganda. The office received information from the other consulate offices reporting back favorable responses to the film exhibitions. Following one such showing to a group of steel workers, one of the workers was recorded saying: "I have never been to the United States and my ideas of the country were completely vague, but after seeing these pictures, I feel proud and confident in knowing that we are working together."<sup>96</sup> However, despite anecdotal evidence attesting to its favorable impact, U.S. officials harbored doubts about the true efficacy of the program. For example, OCIAA officials discovered that reports filled out by crew members were misleading and generally unreliable. Truck operators were provided with surveys containing a standard set of questions. Officials organized the surveys into reports and used the reports to gauge the propaganda value of each film. Conflicting testimonies between U.S. officials and surveyors raised suspicion regarding the data's validity. As one official testified: "I looked over some reports during my recent visit in the interior after seeing an exhibition in which the operator had marked under the heading Audience Reaction – Excellent. Actually the audience reaction was poor. I do not think that the Motion Picture Division can base sound judgment from these improperly filled reaction blanks."<sup>97</sup> In interviews, several

93. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Monthly Motion Picture Report, August 1943.

94. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Hebert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, June 23, 1944.

95. On Americanization in postwar Europe, see Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994).

96. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Francis Alstock to Nelson Rockefeller, August 10, 1944.

97. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, May 29, 1944.

surveyors openly admitted to reporting back what they thought officials would want to hear.

U.S. officials also had complaints with the content of Hollywood films, saying that they were beyond the comprehension of the average Mexican. Francis Alstock, of the Film Division, insisted that the films "were entirely too symbolic for certain audiences to which our pictures are shown."<sup>98</sup> Other complaints included the lack of interest or boredom shown by the Mexican audience especially toward American newsreel. Technical difficulties also posed a major problem. Sound truck operators complained repeatedly of Spanish subtitles lagging behind the action, thus losing the "major part of their appeal." Perhaps the most interesting problem raised by U.S. officials was one of "over-entertainment":

Ninety to ninety-five percent of all the films we are showing through our operators in Mexico do not carry in the title or at the end any mention that such a film is presented through OCIAA. Unless we receive some credit in the title of the film I think we should discontinue the exhibitions as a great many of these films are purely of entertainment value and the only good we can get out of them is to mention that the United States is doing it.<sup>99</sup>

In response to these concerns, U.S. officials went back to polling and surveying to better understand how U.S. films were being received. The Committee started by hiring a crew of six experienced pollsters to survey Mexico City moviegoers. They developed a short survey with three questions and provided the survey crew with a list of fifteen films. What films on the list have they seen? Which had best pleased them? Which had effectively presented its propaganda message? The survey findings indicated a lukewarm reaction to American films. The survey consisted of a sample of 386 Mexican City residents. To the second question asking the respondent if they had liked the movie, ten of the fifteen U.S. films received a score of forty percent or less. To the third question, only two movies received a majority saying that they found the propaganda message effective. The sample for the third question only included those that answered positively to the second question, which made the numbers look far better than they actual were.<sup>100</sup> U.S. propaganda films, in short, tested poorly with Mexican audiences.

#### POPULAR RECEPTION

An examination of the OCIAA's manifold efforts to mold public opinion in Mexico reveals a program hampered by a variety of obstacles and limitations

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98. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Francis Alstock to W.C. Logan, February 2, 1944.

99. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Herbert Cerwin to Nelson Rockefeller, May 29, 1944.

100. NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from R.T. Crump to Nelson Rockefeller, September 14, 1943.

that reduced its overall effectiveness. Everything from technical shortcomings to the lack of knowledge of Mexican predilections to the assumption of a monolithic Mexican public, which resulted initially in a one-size fits all approach, hindered and distorted the transmission of U.S. propaganda in Mexico. OCIAA agents spoke of over-entertainment, and, conversely, of boredom with Hollywood-made films; of Spanish subtitles not tracking with moving images; of transmitting radio programming to towns and villages without electricity; among other problems and missteps, which resulted in Mexicans not receiving the propaganda message or if they did, not receiving it as they were intended. There were also occasions when the U.S. propaganda program was met with active resistance. In March 1943, Francis Alstock of the Film Division reported of college students protesting the showing of an OCIAA film at one of the Mexico City universities.<sup>101</sup>

There were also broader signs that indicated the shallowness of the program's penetration and reach in Mexico. Throughout the course of the war and until its conclusion, the Mexican population in almost all parts of the country demonstrated a general disinterest in the war. One official documented this pervasive apathy when he observed in 1943: "the celebration of the first anniversary of the Mexico's entry into the war on May 28, was generally unenthusiastic on the part of the public."<sup>102</sup> In sharp contrast, festivities marking the anniversary of the nationalization of foreign oil in 1938 generated large turnouts and enthusiastic participation on part of the Mexican people.<sup>103</sup> OCIAA agents faced an uphill battle trying to persuade a people whose memory of U.S. interventions and frequent meddling in Mexican domestic affairs was long. They admitted as much: "It is perhaps harder to convince Mexicans than any other Latin American people that US will never return to its old big-stick pattern of behavior."<sup>104</sup>

Officials were hoping Mexico's official entry into the war in 1942 and the announcement of a formal alliance between the United States and Mexico would drum up public support and enthusiasm for the war effort in Mexico but this did not materialize for the most part. In fact, Mexican political leaders faced enormous difficulties in getting the Mexican people behind the war effort. Government plans for military conscription in December 1942, for instance, aroused popular protest and fierce resistance throughout Mexico. Villagers in Morelos and Veracruz mobilized guerilla groups to oppose military officials who were attempting to enforce the government's orders.<sup>105</sup> The *Sinarquistas*, according to Thomas Rath, were "involved in attacks on the conscription lottery in Aguascalientes and Zacatecas, and had links to the four or five armed groups

<sup>101.</sup> NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Film), Letter from Francis Alstock to James R. Woodul, March 23, 1943.

<sup>102.</sup> WNA 812.00/32148, April 26, 1943.

<sup>103.</sup> WNA 812.00/32139, April 15, 1943.

<sup>104.</sup> NARA, RG 229, Central Files Mexico (Radio), Memorandum: M-2077 Local Activities, September 14, 1943.

<sup>105.</sup> NARA 812.00/32106, March 3, 1943.

roaming the countryside of Puebla, Morelos, the Estado de México and Guerrero.”<sup>106</sup> Public resistance such as these, from across the political spectrum, forced President Ávila Camacho to make civilian military training voluntary in 1943. Consequently, there was a significant decline in the number of Mexican citizens participating in civilian military training.<sup>107</sup>

There were also other war-related demonstrations that challenged the authority of the Mexican state. National celebrations of the oil expropriation, for example, turned into popular protests of declining real wages and food shortages in wartime Mexico, which demonstrators blamed on state corruption. “Crowd mobilizations,” Paul Gillingham writes, “all stemmed from this provocative combination: an unambiguously venal administration overseeing falling living standards.”<sup>108</sup> Outside of these formal occasions, workers staged strikes across the country over these very same grievances.<sup>109</sup> Mexican workers engaged in more strikes in 1943 and 1944 than at any point in Mexican history, including the workers’ “heyday” of the Cárdenas years.<sup>110</sup> But if they served as occasions to censure profiteering Mexican officials and denounce rampant state corruption, protesters also used these moments to demonstrate against the colossus to the north and rage against the wartime alliance. As one U.S. official documented in March 1943: “Paraders commemorating the fifth anniversary of the oil expropriation carried banners protesting hunger – for example: ‘A hungry people cannot work to increase production’; ‘Yes, sir, we are hungry’; ‘Hunger kills the spirit.’ Many blame food prices and shortage on the U.S.”<sup>111</sup>

These popular protests do not amount to precise measurements of the OCIAA’s propaganda campaign in Mexico and thus they cannot speak directly to the questions of reception and effectiveness. However, combined with the myriad issues raised by OCIAA agents and the findings from the audience surveys and studies they conducted, they should put to rest the notion of U.S. wartime propaganda as an irresistible force that manipulated and persuaded at will wherever it was projected.<sup>112</sup> As U.S. officials themselves acknowledged, the

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<sup>106.</sup> Thomas Rath, “‘Que el cielo un soldado en cada hijo te dio...’: Conscription, Recalcitrance and Resistance in Mexico in the 1940s,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37 (2005): 517.

<sup>107.</sup> NARA 812.00/32139, April 15, 1943.

<sup>108.</sup> The food shortages in Mexico were the result of the poor harvests in 1942 and 1943, which some Mexican officials clearly profited from. See Paul Gillingham, “Maximino’s Bulls: Popular Protest after the Mexican Revolution 1940–1952,” *Past and Present* 206, no. 1 (2010): 205.

<sup>109.</sup> According to Ian Roxborough, the Mexican working-class saw dramatic decline in their real wages during the war years. See Ian Roxborough, “Mexico,” in *Latin America between the Second World War and the Cold War 1944–48*, eds. Leslie Bethell and Ian Roxborough (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>110.</sup> Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, *La Democracia en México* (Mexico City, 1965). See Chart 3 in the book’s appendix.

<sup>111.</sup> NARA 812.00/32132, March 31, 1943.

<sup>112.</sup> Too often scholars have taken for granted the power and effects of foreign propaganda in Latin America. Stephen Niblo, for example, has argued that: “Cultural imperialism is a blatant fact in Latin America . . . foreign influence in the mass communication media is ubiquitous.” He thus concludes, “the ability of foreigners to penetrate and manipulate the Mexican media to such a great

accumulated institutional presence of American propaganda did not ensure the successful indoctrination of the Mexican people. Ambassador Messersmith expressed this view most clearly in a searing indictment of the OCIAA agency. “Coordinator Nelson Rockefeller flooded the Americas with news and propaganda and money and his own people . . . that smacked of cultural imperialism, insulted Latin intelligences, and probably converted not a single soul to the Allied cause.” If this sounds like an official grinding an axe in a bureaucratic turf war, British intelligence officers in Mexico largely concurred with Messersmith’s assessments, concluding that when it came to U.S. investment in the propaganda project, “the Americans hardly get a satisfactory return for the amount of money they spend.”<sup>113</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The propaganda campaign in Mexico represented an important shift in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America. For the first time, the United States, using a combination of the power of its corporations, its educational establishment, and its government, attempted to influence and measure Latin American public opinion directly. The exigencies of war and the fascist threat in the Americas compelled policy makers to take seriously the opinions of groups and classes of people—workers, peasants, and housewives—who were formerly outside of foreign policy considerations. This multifaceted campaign, conceived with the support of the Mexican state, which viewed the project as being consistent with its own modernizing vision, included efforts to exert pressure on the Mexican media and cultural industries. Selective pressure yielded desired results in some cases, as shown by the pro-U.S. shift in the wartime news and editorial coverage of Mexican metropolitan newspapers.

But this project to reach and inculcate the Mexican masses with U.S. propaganda was just as often marred by difficulties and mishaps that limited its effectiveness. Technical shortcomings, bureaucratic infighting, and the lack of cultural familiarity contributed to a disjointed propaganda program that was implemented in fits and starts; the OCIAA was far from being a well-oiled machine. Officials also had to contend with anti-American sentiment lingering from the recent oil expropriation crisis as well as the Mexicans’ long memory of U.S. interventions in their country’s affairs. OCIAA agents were, therefore, not dealing with a passive audience that would blindly accept whatever message was projected to them. Official accounts would reveal as much. There was also the widespread apathy toward the war and the violent protests against military conscription and to the sacrifices imposed by the war effort that gave officials pause. This produced widely different assessments of the propaganda campaign with some officials fiercely

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degree that it seems reasonable to view this experience as a bridge between wartime propaganda and cultural imperialism.” See Niblo, “British Propaganda in Mexico during the Second World War,” 114–15.

<sup>113.</sup> Quoted in Rath, “Que el cielo un soldada en cada hijo te dio . . .,” 525.

defending its merits while others casted aspersions on it, deeming it counterproductive and even harmful to wartime relations with Mexico. As this suggests, there was a wide gulf between the theory of propaganda and its practice, which officials had a hard time reconciling.

Yet, despite these problems and tensions, U.S. policy makers during the Cold War adopted the OCIAA wartime propaganda machinery almost wholesale, but now under the aegis of the United States Information Agency (USIA). The OCIAA wartime program of transmitting propaganda through radio airwaves, Hollywood-produced films, and a network of corporate-sponsored sound trucks was redeployed to fight and counter the appeal of communism in postwar Mexico and Latin America. In reproducing wartime propaganda techniques and modes of transmission and the public-private partnerships that underpinned them, USIA agents inherited the same problems that had marred the wartime propaganda project. And like their OCIAA predecessors, they too would have difficulties in measuring and judging the efficacy of their concerted efforts at mass persuasion.

It appears that doubts about the wartime propaganda campaign did little to change attitudes among U.S. policy makers, at least certainly not enough to change policy in any meaningful way into the Cold War. Implementing the wartime propaganda apparatus, with very few modifications, resulted—predictably—in similarly ambiguous and uneven outcomes in Cold War Mexico and Latin America with USIA agents expressing many of the same concerns and misgivings that were raised by OCIAA officials during the war.<sup>114</sup> What we had, then, were two different kinds of muted receptions associated with the U.S. propaganda project, one having to do with the way it was received by the Mexican people, and the other having to do with how its documented failures were ignored or forgotten by bureaucrats. Some of this failure to reckon with past mistakes could probably be chalked up to bureaucratic inertia and a steep learning curve. This hardheadedness, if you will, was also surely a product of a steadfast faith in American technical prowess, and the belief that the saturation of propaganda in the mass media and popular culture would eventually lead to some sort of tipping point—a faith that many scholars of cultural imperialism have shared. But perhaps more importantly, American policy makers could not imagine an alternative to propaganda, and in the absence of an alternative, they proceeded to double-down on tried and untrue methods.

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<sup>114</sup> Fein, “Everyday Forms of Transnational Collaboration,” in *Close Encounters of Empire*.